



Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research. D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 2000. 211 pp.

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In their new book, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly attempt to establish purposes, describe processes, and provide a convincing rationale for narrative modes of knowing, interpreting, and researching. Their most likely audiences are novice researchers interested in exploring narrative methods or teachers of qualitative research seeking explications of the "narrative turn." The book succeeds on two fronts. It argues persuasively for the unique capacity of narrative inquiry to fathom human experiences, and it illuminates the complexities endemic to the undertaking. In staking claims for the value of narrative research, however, the authors constrict some narrative possibilities and skirt some credibility issues raised by critics.

Concurring with John Dewey that the ultimate aim of research is the study of human experience, Clandinin and Connelly make a good case for narrative as epistemological stance, research methodology, and scholarly discourse—all uniquely capable of "getting at" the content of human lives. Narrative, they argue, captures and investigates experiences as human beings live them in time, in space, in person, and in relationship. They demonstrate clearly, if a bit repetitiously, that those who undertake narrative inquiry need to attend to a "three-dimensional inquiry space"—the temporal, the spatial, and the personal-social.

The authors are at their best emphasizing the research process as itself a lived experience. They disclose the uncertainties, fears, and doubts likely to haunt qualitative researchers as they move recursively from the identification of research problems through all the stages necessary for composing a persuasive research report. In doing so, Clandinin and Connelly bring their own stories as researchers to bear, modeling the reflexivity necessary to lend the inquiry process integrity. Particularly delightful is their account of "narrating Bloom's taxonomy," a story about an incident earlier in their careers when they worked with a team to revise the famous taxonomy. Their experience demonstrates clearly how recasting an abstract schema in narrative terms exposes its limitations to guide action in particular contexts with specific human beings.

Punctuated with rich examples, the book takes on some potentially confusing and troubling research issues. For instance, the authors discuss "signature," or writing



style, which they warn can be either too weak, so as to efface the researcher's interpretive presence, or too strong, so as to eclipse research participants and contexts. Moreover, they point out fluid, sometimes confusing boundaries between methods like conversations and interviews, field notes and autobiographies, observation and participation. Foregrounding relationship and dialogue, the authors warn that signed research agreements do not dispose of ethical concerns. "Informed consent" relies, in fact, on researchers and participants continuously negotiating and renegotiating purposes and expectations as the research progresses. Throughout, they urge a "wide-awakeness" to guard against lapses into either the paralysis of excessive self-criticism or the blindness of overconfidence.

The book has some weaknesses. One is an oversimplified argument that narrative exists on the boundaries of two opposing "grand narratives" in educational research. On one side are "reductionist" research traditions that require the breaking down of phenomena into analyzable parts. On the other are researchers, dubbed formalists, who begin their work from theoretical positions. Narrative inquiry, the authors claim, works on the borders of either tradition. While it is true that research, done poorly, can either fragment or totalize human experience, not all who parse stories into movements or adopt theoretical lenses for reading lived landscapes do either. Some narrative inquirers, for example, have brought theory to bear in such a way as to disclose the unconscious, the suppressed, the marginalized, and the unnamable, actually releasing specificity and authenticity instead of totalizing them. By suggesting that narrative celebrates the personal while theory tends to obscure it, the authors discount the experiences of those who turn to theory in order to think through the pain of their lives and imagine better alternatives. For them, theory, quite a personal matter, becomes an integral part of their own autobiographies.

Ultimately, Clandinin and Connelly lean most heavily on narrative as a form of representation rather than a mode of analysis. Human lives, they suggest, are woven of stories. Individuals construct their identities through their own and others' stories. They experience daily encounters and interactions as stories. Every present moment has a storied past and a storied future possibility. Social phenomena become a converging point for individual, collective, and cultural stories. In making these characterizations, the authors proffer interesting ideas about creating field and research texts, potentially useful for qualitative researchers. When I think about my own students in qualitative research, however, I regret that the book does not offer more insight into the thorny problems of analysis and trustworthiness. If story is everything and everywhere, then how can narrative research be distinguished from any other human activity? How does it differ, say, from ethnography or journalism? How does this form of inquiry wring meaning from social situations to gesture toward



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deeper and richer ways of understanding and being? How can narrative inquirers, faced with a myriad of stories and their intersections, make useful sense of them? What about the relationship between lived experiences and research texts makes some of the latter more credible, persuasive, and generative than others? There is a great deal at stake here if the object of inquiry is schooling. Might we, finally, draw a borderline between a fictive account of classrooms and schools and one grounded in the empirical work of a qualitative researcher? And how might or *should* they differ if our ultimate aim is to make classrooms more hospitable and generative for children's learning?

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